THOMAS CAREW AND THE CAVALIER POETS

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English lyric poetry achieved, in the first half of the seventeenth century, a kind of perfection not matched in any other period. The major figures, Donne, Jonson, Herbert, Marvell, have been given their due, and even the early Milton has been invited to join them once again. But it was an age also of very good minor poetry. Indeed, a look at any anthology of the period will show that men who were less than great in range or depth were yet capable of flying high. This is as much as to say that there were traditions within which poets could perfect their craft, work out their individual themes without discovering wholly new mines of invention. Of these minor poets—and "minor" is not a disparagement in such an age—Thomas Carew deserves more attention than he has received. Carew is both a good poet in his own right, and a "typical" poet of his period, who perhaps would not have done so well if he had lived either earlier or later. I shall try briefly to indicate, first the inherited, and then the individual characteristics of his poetry. The latter—the individual qualities—can best be seen, I think, in comparison with those of three of his contemporaries who are often grouped with him in critical discussions: the so-called "Cavalier" poets, Herrick, Suckling, and Lovelace.

First, there is the poetic inheritance, in which the legacy of Donne is most noticeable. However Dryden, Johnson, and later critics came to censure or to praise Donne for his "metaphysical" wit, Carew openly avowed his discipleship in the best piece of Donne criticism of the seventeenth century, the Elegie. The following passage has not been improved upon as a statement of Donne’s originality, force, and toughness. It is a comparison of Donne with the ancients:

Thou shalt yield no precedence, but of time,
And the blinde fate of language, whose tun’d chime
More charmes the outward sense; Yet thou maist claime
From so great disadvantage greater fame,
Since to the awe of thy imperious wit
Our stubborne language bends, made only fit
With her tough-thick-rib’d hoopes to gird about
Thy Giant phansie, which had prov’d too stout
For their soft melting Phrases. As in time
They had the start, so did they cull the prime
Buds of invention many a hundred yeare,
And left the rifled fields, besides the feare
To touch their Harvest, yet from those bare lands
Of what is purely thine, thy only hands
(And that thy smallest worke) have gleaned more
Than all those times, and tongues could reape before.

The passage itself is Donnian, and the many echoes of Donne throughout Carew's poetry attest to the sincerity of the praise. Knowing that he could not mimic Donne too closely in paradoxical wit, or in startling conceits, or especially in the rhetorical wrenching of rhythm to fit the thought, Carew yet assimilated some of the tone and some of the force of Donne's innovations. What he learned from Donne was to probe, explore, question, ring changes on the old conceits. Even apart from what he called Donne's "Mine of rich and pregnant phansie," which he tapped as often as most of Donne's followers, Carew found congenial the Donnian intellectual attitudes toward love in the Songs and Sonnets and the Elegies. His longest, best, and least printable poem, A Rapture, was called by Professor Grierson "the most daring and poetically the happiest of the imitations of Donne's clever if outrageous elegies." There is time here for only a smaller, and in fact a more typical, lyric which shows the influence. Ingrateful beauty threatened reflects the chiding attitude of Donne's Elegie VII, adapted to Carew's own ends and talents:

Know Celia, (since thou are so proud,)
'Twas I that gave thee thy renowne:
Thou hadst, in the forgotten crowd
Of common beauties, liv'd unknowne,
Had not my verse exhald thy name,
And with it, ympt the wings of fame.

That killing power is none of thine,
I gave it to thy voice, and eyes:
Thy sweets, thy graces, all are mine;
Thou art my starre, shin'st in my skies;
Then dart not from thy borrowed sphere
Lightning on him, that fixt thee there.

Tempt me with such affrights no more,
Lest what I made, I uncreate;
Let fooles thy mystique formes adore,
I'le know thee in thy mortall state:
Wise Poets that wrap't Truth in tales,
Knew here themselves, through all her vailes.
But the differences are as striking as the similarities. Here is the closing passage of Donne's *Elegie*:

Thy graces and good words my creatures bee;
I planted knowledge and lifes tree in thee,
Which Oh, shall strangers taste? Must I alas
Frame and enamell Plate, and drinke in Glassse?
Chafe waxe for others scales? breake a colts force
And leave him then, beeing made a ready horse?

There the poem ends, not, one feels, for want of other means to illustrate the relationship, but because an additional metaphor would be anticlimactic after that last one. Carew's movement is less nervous, his imagery less audacious. Beside his delicately ironic conclusion, Donne's "ready horse" produces a brutal shock, not only because it is a horse, but also because it is a complete departure from the images which led up to it.

Partly responsible for these differences is the other influence which I want to touch on, the influence of Ben Jonson. The "hostility" of the two schools has been over-emphasized in later criticism. It should not be forgotten that Jonson, though he censured Donne's rhythms, called him "the best poet in the world in some things." Jonson's lyrics, as different as they are from Donne's in both motivation and effect, are written in a mode opposed, like Donne's, to softness of sentiment and flaccidity of expression. Both poets put a premium on intellect in poetry, if Jonson did not believe in charting so minutely as Donne the fits and starts of the mind.

But that "if" is a key to the (often deceptive) simplicity of many Caroline lyrics, among them some of Carew's best. "Pure and neat language I love," wrote Jonson in *Discoveries*, "yet plaine and customary. A barbarous Phrase hath often made mee out of love with a good sense; and doubtful writing hath wrackt mee beyond my patience." As a poet-critic, Jonson generally practices what he preaches. He usually has something fairly straightforward to say, and says it with clarity and precision. Jonson's careful attention to form and decorum, his distaste for tortured and obscure displays of wit, his solid classical learning, his control of tone and idea, set a critical and practical standard comparable to Dryden's in its authority. It is a discipline that leaves its mark not mainly on separate lines and passages, nor on individual attitudes toward subject matter, but on the artistic integrity of complete poems. Carew, as we might expect, has fewer "echoes" of Jonson than of Donne. A conceit or a pose picked up from Donne, however, may be simplified, stripped of some of its overtones, and fitted into a more regular pattern of
sound and thought; and the result may remind one as much of Jonson as the detail recalls Donne. As a single example in the amorous vein (Carew’s chief vein), one thinks of Carew’s “Aske me no more,” which achieves a kind of lyric perfection similar to that of Jonson’s “Drinke to me, onely, with thine eyes.” Not that the thought isn’t partly “metaphysical,” but that the form, the tone, the total impact of the poem combine to prevent the mind from wandering into what Dryden impatiently called “nice speculations of philosophy.”

That the two influences were not “hostile” may be seen in Carew’s epitaph on Maria Wentworth.

And here the precious dust is layd;
Whose purely-tempered Clay was made
So fine, that it the guest betray’d.

Else the soule grew so fast within,
It broke the outward shell of sinne
And so was hatch’d a Cherubin.

In heigth, it soar’d to God above;
In depth, it did to knowledge move,
And spread in breadth to generall love.

Before, a pious duty shind,
To Parents, courtesie behind,
On either side an equall mind,

Good to the Poore, to kindred deare,
To servants kind, to friendship cleare,
To nothing but her selfe, severe.

So though a Virgin, yet a Bride
To every Grace, she justifi’d
A chaste Poligamie, and dy’d.

Learne from hence (Reader) what small trust
We owe this world, where vertue must
Fraile as our flesh, crumble to dust.

F. R. Leavis has rightly called attention to the double influence here. Donne and Jonson, if they had collaborated to celebrate Maria Wentworth, could not have done better.

What is left, it might be asked, that is uniquely Carew’s? If he owed so much to Donne and to Jonson, not to speak of the Elizabethan sonneteers, the classical amorists, and the continental conceittists, can he be said to have had any individual characteristics? The mere posing of the question reminds us of
the homogeneity, and at the same time of the eclecticism, of so much seventeenth-century poetry: it would be very difficult to identify the author of many a fine lyric in the manuscript anthologies of the time, which somehow does not seem to be less good for being "typical." But Carew, in his best poems, is a little more than merely "typical." It seems to me that he stands slightly apart from his "traditions," and from his contemporaries who shared them, in three respects: in the careful working out of single metaphors, in the logical persuasiveness of argument, and in the combined variety and smoothness of rhythm. I say "stands slightly apart" because I do not wish to claim for Carew qualities which no other poets had, especially in an age when just these qualities were prized so highly; I mean that in his best poems Carew exploited them more consistently than any of his contemporaries.

The third quality, which I have called combined variety and smoothness of rhythm, is more easily heard than analyzed. The way Carew "overflows" his couplets, shifts has caesuras, reverses occasional feet for momentary cross-patterns—and yet does all this subtly so as not to violate the basic form but to give it flexibility and strength—this is the way of a poet whose ear is finely attuned to the special "music" of the lyric.

The other two qualities, the powers of metaphorical elaboration and logical persuasiveness, are found in varying degrees: a long poem like To A. L. Persuasions to love reveals Carew's argumentative skill as equal to Marvell's in To his Coy Mistress, which it anticipates in many respects; while some of the shorter pieces give Carew his best opportunity to develop a single image or a cluster of images. This last skill seems to me the most important distinguishing feature of Carew's power, and it can be illustrated briefly by a quotation of one of his little epitaphs on the child Mary Villers.

The purest Soule that e're was sent
Into a clayie tenement
Inform'd this dust, but the weake mold
Could the great guest no longer hold,
The substance was too pure, the flame
Too glorious that thither came:
Ten thousand Cupids brought along
A Grace on each wing, that did throng
For place there, till they all opprest
The seat in which they sought to rest;
So the fair Modell broke, for want
Of roome to lodge th' Inhabitant.
The whole poem is a sustained conceit. The appropriateness of
the conceit is that it fits a child, and at the same time draws an
ageless contrast between the immortal soul and its earthly
resting-place. The words stick precisely to this conceit: tenen-
ment, guest, place, seat, rest, room, lodge, inhabitant. The body
is too frail and the soul too great, but it is mainly the “want of
roome,” since she was only a child, that broke the “weake mold.”
Greatness of soul in a child, a hyperbolic notion, is strangely
and aptly made believable by equating it, still more hyperbolically in
one sense, with an infinite number (twenty thousand!) of tiny
graces belonging to the tiny child of Venus; whereas it would
have been outrageous to compare her outright with Venus her-
self. And so the soul is finally exalted without detracting from
the purity of the substance which temporarily contained it.

With these characteristics in mind, I should like to suggest a
few points of comparison with the three Cavalier poets, Herrick,
Suckling, and Lovelace.

Herrick and Carew both polished their poems, Herrick with a
sharp eye on publication:

Better 'twere my Book were dead,
Then to live not perfected.

But they polished to different purposes. Herrick’s sense of form
might almost be equated with the title of one of his best poems,
Delight in Disorder. A kind of esthetic theory may be read into
the poem itself: “A sweete disorder ... An erring Lace ... Doe
more bewitch me, then when Art/ Is too precise in every part.”
What is prized is not natural simplicity, but a calculated “wan-
tonness” (to use another favorite word of Herrick’s). If a word
or a phrase catches the ear or eye partly because it does not quite
fit into the usual pattern, or calls up another image than the one
immediately in question, or rolls “winningly” on the tongue inde-
pendent of its logical function, it is not very different from the
“lawne ... thrown / Into a fine distraction.” For example, the
final couplet of Upon Sylvia, a Mistress does not “follow” from
the images of the rest, but it is worth all the rest:

Upon thy Forme more wrinkles yet will fall
And coming downe, shall make no noise at all.

Carew has few such flashes; Herrick specializes in them. He
relies much more than Carew on sensuous impressions:

Numbers ne’r tickle, or but lightly please,
Unlesse they have some wanton carriages.
Herrick is tickled by sights and smells, and tickles the senses of his readers in turn. No other poet has responded with such palpitations to feminine clothes. It is a sensitivity to surface things which has its obverse in the unreflective coarseness of some of his epigrams. He never introduced a love-scene, as Carew did in *A Rapture*, with "No curtaine there, though of transparent lawne"; for him, the lawn was as thrilling as the flesh.

The connotative richness of Herrick's language has been noted by F. W. Bateson, who spoke of "the vague splendour" of *The Primrose*. The word "Infanta" in the second line is partly responsible for this impression: "This sweet Infanta of the yeere." The word was added by Herrick for the final version; an earlier version (which incidentally appeared in the 1640 edition of Carew's *Poems*) began with this couplet:

Aske me why I send you here,
This firstling of the infant yeare.

The change is away from precision, toward exotic association. This kind of suggestiveness is akin to Herrick's interest in sensuous impressions. He is seldom systematic, in the sense in which Carew, in *To A. L. Persuasions to love*, is systematic. His lovers' complaints are generally more pathetic than prophetic. The warning theme of *The cruell Maid* is sandwiched between an apologetic introduction and a more or less inconsequent conclusion asking for a tear and a kiss of pity over his tomb. *To Dianeme* is more single-minded, but there are noticeable differences between its pathetic argument and Carew's marshalling of unanswerable "points." Herrick's single line, "Sunk from the tip of your soft ear," conveys more melting affection than the whole poem cancels; while Carew's details of beauty are grudgingly listed and effectually belittled, as by a man always on his guard. Again, to take another poetic cliche of the day, the rose in the mistress's bosom: Carew's *On a Damaske rose* rises to a kind of devotional eloquence, while Herrick's *Upon Roses*, for all its "flowrie Nunnery," appeals primarily to the senses. If Carew's poem is the more commonplace, Herrick's is the slighter. Both poets recognized their limitations, Carew in his modest tributes to other poets (such as the elegy on Donne), Herrick in such disarming lines as these:

A little streame best fits a little Boat;
A little lead best fits a little Float;
As my small Pipe best fits my little note.

The other two poets, Suckling and Lovelace, do not challenge Carew in his special qualities. They share with him the urbanity
of the courtier, but not the consistency of the artist. Both are comparatively careless poets, though in different ways. Suckling, who chided Carew’s “hard-bound muse,” is most characteristically a cynical amorist whose cynicism extends to matters of craftsmanship. His conversational style, which recommended itself to the Restoration inheritors of the “Cavalier” tradition, is suited to his careless tones and his scoffing attitudes. His rhythms seem at times improvised; his lines do not always rhyme; and his colloquial, parenthetical padding works for the same effect, as though he composed quickly, brilliantly (perhaps with “given” rhymes), for a wager. There is a natural grace, which is seldom sustained through a whole poem. He uses metaphor much less than Carew, and does not develop a poem around it but brings it in by way of exemplum, which may be broken off or shifted at random to suit his whim. When he does, rarely, develop a figure, as in Love’s World, the development is pedestrian, as though he were concentrating more than he liked on writing a consistent poem:

The sea’s my mind, which calm would be,
   Were it from winds (my passions) free;
   But out alas! no sea I find
   Is troubled like a lover’s mind.

At other times, and more characteristically, he frankly abandons the attempt to be “poetic,” and carries off the failure by throwing the whole problem overboard. The humor saves him, but when he is following Donne, as in “I prithee send me back my heart,” the failure to sustain the intellectual effort is not amusing. Suckling admired Donne as much as Carew did, and echoed Carew’s praise of the monarch of wit. But, though neither poet matched Donne in intellectual or metaphorical complexity, Carew’s poetic fancy comes closer to the wit of the master than Suckling’s, if Suckling’s cynical humor is an easier and more immediately recognizable substitute.

The carelessness of Lovelace is not, like Suckling’s, a product of indifference, but of curiosity. Professor R. C. Bald has said that, of the three, Carew, Suckling and Lovelace, the last is “the least naturally a metaphysical poet.” It is true that his best-known poems, which are also his best—To Lucasta, Going to the Warres, and To Althea, From Prison—reduce paradox to the simplest terms; but it is not clear, judging from the relative paucity of such poems in his canon, that this simplicity was “natural” to him. His range is wide, and in all his variety he exhibits a strong wit of the kind carried to extremes by Cleveland and deplored by Doctor Johnson. Perhaps it is fruitless to
speculate which is the more natural, the wit or the simplicity; but his wit is certainly more “metaphysical” than either Suckling’s or Carew’s. In these lines from *Love made in the first Age: to Chloris*, a poem which in many ways parallels *A Rapture*, there is a grotesque ingenuity unlike Carew’s most contrived bee-simile:

Then unconfined each did Tipple  
Wine from the Bunch, Milk from the Nipple,  
Paps tractable as Udders were;  
Then equally the wholesome Jellies,  
Were squeež’d from Olive-Trees, and Bellies,  
Nor Suits of Trespasse did they fear.

Lovelace often wanders beyond the limits imposed by his subject, and the reader may lose interest before the poet does. There is a lack of tightness in the longer poems, and a multiplicity of images, which recall Donne. The active imagination is closer to Donne’s in its working than Carew’s or Suckling’s, in spite of the wide gap between his and Donne’s powers of psychological and philosophical penetration.

Lovelace’s facility of invention, however, does not prevent a few of his poems from revealing a serious vein of honor and chivalry which Carew never matches. If Carew had lived into the decade of the civil wars (he died in 1639), he might have developed into a more active and less decorous royalist; and if he had been imprisoned, as Lovelace was, he might have written a poem to Celia from prison, thus adding to the very small collection of poems which suggest, as Professor Grierson has said, “what ‘Cavalier’ came to mean when glorified by defeat.”

There is undoubtedly a certain “decay of feeling” in much Caroline verse, and two poets as different as Habington and Cleveland manifest the extent to which convention, be it tearful or witty, eventually dries up. Both of these poets have something in common with Carew—Habington in the adoption of the time-worn symbols of the love poetry of the previous century, Cleveland in the extravagant and intellectualized wit of the Donne tradition. Yet Carew is generally free of the completely commonplace, as he is of the completely fantastic. He re-informs the old conceits with new meanings, creates ironic contexts for the expression of traditional attitudes, and argues or pleads with a combination of grace and ingenuity that disguises platitude.